10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

THE KARENS OF BURMA

I

BACKGROUND

101 175 THE Karen people of Burma are now the second most important tribe in the country; but one hundred years ago they were called by their more powerful Burman neighbours the "Wild Cattle of the Hills".

At that time they were unorganized and lived in the dense forests that covered the country, especially in the ranges of hills that afforded them protection. They had no written language and were held in bondage to the fears that made their lives stagnant and prevented their changing the customs that they had received from their ancestors.

181 131 361 563 186 They were not an aggressive people and sought security in withdrawal from the rivers, which in those days were the only lines of communication, and they built their small villages high up in the hills or other places difficult of access. Here they lived in poverty but not without hope that some day their descendants would have better times. But now like hunted birds they admonished their children as they squatted at their rude low tables to eat their rice, "Eat fast, eat fast. The Burmans may come!"

193. 171 Their origin is obscure. They have no written records and the destructive wet climate has obliterated almost all

10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

173 traces of their ancestry. Probably they originated in China
171 and came into Burma from the north-east in about the sixth or seventh century of the Christian era. Their language and personal characteristics would seem to indicate this.

101 The derivation of the term "Karen" is uncertain. It is the name by which this people have been called by the Burmese. The name by which they call themselves is *Pga K' Nyaw* which may be of Chinese origin and means "Men". They are the only real men. All other peoples are designated by their name as "Burman", "English", and so on.

II

DISTRIBUTION

101 The only part of Burma that can be called Karen
131 country is that lying eastward from Toungoo. Here in
563 the mountains the villages have never been dominated by their more powerful Burman neighbours and in several sections they retain their Karen names. In other sections they are known by Burmese names and show the influence of their having been overpowered at some time.

101 On the eastern slopes of the ranges which are dominat-
631 ed by Mt. Nattaung (called by the Karens *Thaw Thi*) are the three small independent states the chiefs of which are Karens. They belong to the Red Karen tribes and are called in Burmese Karen-ni. These states are Bawlekeh, Kyetpogyi and Kantarrawaddi and do not comprise a part of Burma politically except that they owe their security to the British Government with whom they have treaty relations established by the early Deputy Commissioners of Toungoo.

There are a few Karens in the ranges of hills as far

19: Marshall · M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

speech. Dr. D. C. Gilmore believes that the Pwo dialect branched off from the parent stem earlier than the Sgaw, but kept the original nasals and, being in closer contact with outside races, adopted more outside words.[9] The Sgaw has dropped the final nasals, because they were more difficult to pronounce, but has kept the original form of the language to a greater extent than the Pwo.

The fact that the Karen have used bronze drums for many generations has, I think, a bearing on their racial relationship. These remarkable drums have only recently been studied by Western scholars, and their full significance is still a matter for investigation. These drums were formerly thought to be of Chinese origin, but it seems that they are to be attributed to aboriginal tribes, found in what is now Tong King and Yunnan by the Chinese generals, Ma Yuon (41, A.D.) and Chu-Ko Liang (230, A.D.), who conquered these territories for the Chinese.[10]

The upper portion of Camboja is now considered to be the original home of these drums. They formed part of the possessions of the chiefs and were considered very precious, each being worth from eight to ten oxen. Chu-ko Liang is reported to have exacted sixty-three bronze drums as tribute from the barbarians and to have taken them back with him. Among the peoples of Burma the Karen seem to be the only race that has made use of these drums. They do not manufacture them, but buy them from the more industrious Shans, who do not appear to set much store by them.[11] Among the Karen, until recent times, the owner of one of these instruments was considered of more worth than a man who had seven elephants. A drum often formed the ransom of a village or the dowry of a maiden. Although so valued a possession often belongs to a chief, it may belong to any one who can purchase it.

It may have been from the Karen that the Chinese generals exacted part or all of their tribute. If so, this people was living in the mountains of Yunnan at the beginning of the Christian era.

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[9] D. C. Gilmore, "Phonetic Changes in the Karen Languages" in *Journal, Burma Research Society*, Vol. VIII, Pt. ii, pp. 122, ff.

[10] Several pamphlets and articles in anthropological journals deal with these drums. The most extensive work on the subject, which is in German, is by Franz Heger and is entitled *Alte Metalltrommeln aus Sudost-Asien*, Leipzig 1902. An excellent short work entitled "Anciens Tambours de Bronze," is by H. Parmentier and is printed in the *Bulletin l'Ecole d' Extreme-Orient*, Hanoi, 118. See also Chapter XIII on Bronze Drums, pp. 115-126.

[11] W. W. Cochrane, in *The Shans*, mentions the Shan towns of Tagaung or Ta Kawng and Mogaung or Mong-Kawg as denoting, respectively, Drum Ferry and Drum Town, and on page 62 he says: "They took also a palace drum, whose reverberations could call the people together, daunt enemies, or bring rain in time of drought." He makes no further reference to their use.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

173 534 It is a belief of the Karen that their forefathers have cherished these drums from time immemorial. One drum in Toungoo district is, I have been told, supposed to be a thousand years old. Our knowledge of them is, however, too meagre to permit any dogmatic statements on the subject. Further investigation should throw more light upon it.

171 173 The religious traditions of the Karen have also been thought to possess significance in regard to their racial origin. When, in 1827, the early missionaries first discovered the Karen, they were surprised to find that these people professed having received from their forefathers monotheistic traditions in which the story of the creation was almost parallel to the Mosaic account in Genesis. (See p. 211.) The question, "Whence this story?" at once suggested itself. Was it their independent possession from the beginning of time. their only relic from a more vigorous and highly civilized past when, as they explained, they had not yet lost their book?[12] Or had it been borrowed from another people, whom they had met in the course of their wanderings from their northern birthplace to their present home? Some of the early missionaries, including Dr. Mason, thought that the Karen might be found to be the lost tribes of Israel [13] or, if not actually descended from Abraham, that they had received instruction from colonies of Jews, who were supposed to have spread to the East in ancient times.

It has also been suggested that Christian missionaries, traveling to the Orient during the early centuries of our era, transmitted this creation story to the Karen. On this point the comment of Dr. Laufer is pertinent.[14] He says: "The 'River of running sand' in the traditions of the Karen is not necessarily to be interpreted as the Desert of Gobi; at least it is not convincing. Still less is it conceivable that their legends should suggest an acquaintance with the Jewish colonies in China, or even with the Nestorian tablet at Sia-gan-fu."

[12] The tradition of the Lost Book is not peculiar to the Karen, but seems to be found also among other tribes in and about Burma, *e. g.*, the Kaws, Was, Palaungs, and the Hkamoks of Siam: letter of Mr. Taw Sein Ko to Thra Ba Te, dated 10th Oct., 1917.

[13] In a letter to the Baptist Missionary Society, dated Oct., 1832, Dr. Mason mentions hearing of the shipwreck on the Tenasserim River some decades before of a foreign merchant who told the Karen that other white men would come and teach them about God. He adds that he thought that the traditions came from Portuguese priests who had earlier come to the East. But in a later letter, dated Oct., 1834, Dr. Mason writes that he had come to believe that the traditions were indigenous with the Karen, whom he thought to be the lost Hebrew tribes. He wrote a communication to the Government to that effect from the "Headquarters of the Tenasserim," dated Dec. 6, 1833. (*See Missionary Magazine*, Dec., 1832, p. 469, and Oct. 1834, p. 382).

[14] *See Journal, American Folklore*, Vol. XXXI, No. CXX, pp. 202, ff. for his review of Sir J. G. Scott's Indo-Chinese Mythology, in *Mythology of All Races*, Vol. XII.

[1] [i.e. Bronze drums, see p. 9, cat. 116 -- Analyst.]

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

Sin-gan-fu. The small number of Jewish immigrants into China, who were chiefly settled at K'ai-fong in Ho-nan, have never been able to exert the slightest influence on their surroundings, but, on the contrary, have been so completely sinsized that they are now almost extinct. Nestorianism left no trace on the thought of Chinese society. The inscription in question is written in such an exalted and highly literary style that it is quite unintelligible to the people and its technical terminology is a complete mystery to the present scholars of China. No popular influence can be attributed to such a monument." It appears that the number and antiquity of early Jewish immigrants into China have been much overestimated by many writers, so that, if present scholarship is correct, this source from which the Karen could have obtained their tradition has practically been eliminated.[15]

Though there seems to be little ground left for connecting the Karen story of the creation with either the Jewish or Nestorian colonies of China, there are one or two points that might be borne in mind in regard thereto. The story is universally known among the Karen tribes and most fully among the Red Karen, who have been least affected by outside influences in recent times. It contains no reference to the life or teachings of Christ or to any real Messianic hope, but suggests only *Old Testament material*, such as the creation, fall, flood, and tower of Babel, besides containing the Red Karen genealogy. Hence, it would seem that we can hardly attribute the story to the Portuguese missionaries, who were not in Burma until the sixteenth century or later. It would rather point to an earlier Jewish source, from which the story came back in the days when the tribes were less divided than they were later. For if Christian teachers had taught the Karen, would they not have made a deeper impression with their story of salvation than with the less significant one of creation?

Some writers have asserted that the original religion of China was a sort of monotheism, in which one god, the Emperor of Heaven, was somewhat akin to the Jehovah of the Hebrews, though not worshiped to the exclusion of all other deities. There

[15] See also *China and Religion* by E. G. Parker, who says (page 198) that there is no mention of any Western religion in China up to the end of the sixth century, A. D., when Christianity entered the country, except Buddhism which had come in centuries before. On page 165 he gives the date of the arrival of the Jewish colonies in China as 1163, A. D. The article on China in the latest edition of the *Encyclopedia Brittanica* also bears out this testimony.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

CHAPTER XI

HUNTING AND FISHING

There is nothing in which a Karen delights so much as to hunt, unless it be the gastronomic pleasures that follow a successful chase. Schoolboys spend their Saturdays in the jungle with their slingshots and blowpipes. Teachers and clerks spend their holidays in the same way. The villager may go by himself to stalk deer or shoot birds and other game along the runways; but the sport that he enjoys most is the drive for game, which is abundant in the hills of Burma, participated in by all the men of the village armed with their weapons and nets. A promising place is chosen, such as the open end of a ravine, where some of the hunters stretch and make fast their nets and retire into an ambush near at hand. The others of the party go to the far end of the area included in the drive and begin to beat the bushes with their spears and knives, while shouting and making a great noise generally. The game is thus driven from cover to the nets, where it usually gets entangled and is soon dispatched by the spears and crossbows of the men waiting there. Nearly all kinds of game are caught in this manner, from rabbits to tigers and elephants. Pigs and deer are, however, most commonly hunted in this way. This is men's sport, and the women never take part in it, so far as I know. The game is divided among the hunters, each sharing more or less equally. If any parts of a carcass are supposed to possess medicinal value, they are appropriated by the one who killed the animal and distributed by him as he thinks best.

Besides the ordinary weapons used in warfare and described in the chapter dealing with that subject, the Karen employ in the chase the blow-gun, the crossbow, the bow, and the spear. The blow-gun is similar to that used in Malaysia, Borneo, and the Philippine Islands, but is not decorated as are those of the Malay tribes. The implement consists of a ten or twelve-foot length of a slim variety of bamboo, the tube or bore of which is the size of a small pencil. The length is first straightened by being hung from a tree with a weight of stones or logs to the bottom end. The transverse

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

membranes at the joints are then drilled out with a sharp stick of hard wood, and small arrows are shaped and smoothed to fit accurately the bore of the blow-gun, the rear end of each arrow being tufted with a circle of feathers. A quick expulsion of the breath against one of these missiles inserted in the long tube drives it with sufficient force to kill small birds and game at a distance of a few yards. To use the implement effectively one must be able to stalk the game noiselessly and to bring the weapon to bear on it unawares. This gun may have been copied from Burman guns, for I do not find it in the hills.[1] The Karen hunters do not seem to be as skilful in its use as are the tribesmen of the Philippines, Borneo, and the Malay States.

The crossbow ("hkli") is one of the favorite implements for hunting among the Karen, but never seems to have found favor with them as a fighting weapon.[2]

The stock is made of some firm wood and has a small handle, like that of a cheek-gun.[3] Its entire length is not more than three feet. The bow is shaped out of cutch wood ("nya"), which is very tough and resilient. It varies in length, but is usually about four feet. The string is twisted fibre, generally that of the roselle plant *(Hibiscus sabdariffa)*. The bow is so strong that sometimes it takes two men to bend it, the string being held back by a rough trigger. The arrows consist of straight pieces of bamboo sharpened and slightly charred in the fire at one end to harden them, while they are tufted with feathers or fitted with a slip of dry palm or plantain leaf at the other end, which is bound around with string. Sometimes the arrow tips are barbed or supplied with flat iron points, and sometimes they are smeared with a thick gum taken from the Upas tree *(Antiaris ovalfloria)*, which is indigenous to Burma. This species of tree is similar to that from which the Malay and Borneo tribes obtain poison for their arrows. The milky juice exudes from incisions made in the bark of the tree and drys into a dark viscous gum, which is very bitter. This poison is supposed to be more virulent if gathered at certain times of the year. After being smeared with the poisonous substance, the arrow-tip is al-

[1] For a discussion of the blow-gun, see Skeat and Blagden, *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula*, Vol. I. 254-257.

[2] The crossbow is found all over Yunnan among the Lisu and the Lolo. It is used in China, having been evidently adopted from the Lolo, as its name there indicates. It is not seen in Tibet, or is it used by the Burmese or by the Malay tribes, except as a toy by the children in Borneo: Hose and MacDougall, *The Pagan Races of Borneo*, Vol. I, 46. The crossbow does not seem to be found in the Philippine Islands.

[3] See p. 188.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

CHAPTER XIII

BRONZE DRUMS

Early travelers noticed the presence of large bronze drums in the Karen houses in Karenni and in the Toungoo Hills; but it is only recently that these drums have been made the subject of careful study. In the latter part of the nineteenth century Europeans first began to examine similar objects that were brought from China. It has been discovered that these objects are scattered through a vast area extending from Mongolia on the north to the Celebes Islands on the south, but that their place of origin was probably in the old Cambodian kingdom of the Indo-Chinese peninsula. Four or five classes of such drums are distinguished, of which the Karen drums form one group.[1]

The Karen drums are characterized by a nearly straight cylinder or body, which has a slightly narrowed waist. The cylinder is encircled by bands of conventionalized designs between sets of straight lines forming the borders of the bands. In some cases there is a line of molded figures of elephants and snails down one side of the cylinder. The flat circular metal head extends a little beyond the body, forming a rim. In the center of the head is a large star enclosed by concentric circles between which are narrower or wider zones filled with figures of different patterns. Distributed at equal intervals around the outer edge of the head are four or six frogs in relief. Sometimes these frogs are in sets of two, one on top of the other; sometimes in sets of three, superimposed one upon another. The two pairs of small handles are situated on opposite sides of the body of the drum well toward the top, and present the appearance of neatly braided straps. These bronze drums vary in size from about eighteen inches across the head to about thirty inches.

[1] In addition to the authorities mentioned at the foot of page 9, Chapter II, the article by W. Foy, entitled "Über Alte Bronzetrommeln aus Sudost Asien" in the *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wein*, Vol. XXXIII, (1903) is a valuable contribution to the general subject of bronze drums. Herr Foy, however, differs somewhat in classification from Franz Heger, who is followed by M. Parmentier. Origin, shape, and ornamentation form the basis for the differentiation into classes. Heger puts the Karen drums in Type III, while Foy distinguishes them as Type V.

343 thefts from /216/ the grain sheds are extremely
778 rare (22).

●[171] 22. T.C. Hodson reports this about the Naga, The Naga Tribes of Manipur (London, 1911), p. 42, in conjunction with McCulloch.

342 The crudely built bamboo house (Plate VII, 2) has in front a veranda which is reached by a steep ladder; the roof extends over the former (23).

23. A short remark about the Karenni house by A. Fischer, Zeitschrift für Ethnologie /Journal for Ethnology/, Vol. 35 (1903), pp. 991 ff.; the typical veranda of the house which has been reproduced here is completely damaged.

The occupants remain here during the daytime, and here the women keep their weaver's looms and spinning equipment; sometimes one of those [534] large bronze drums (pasi), which the literature mentions so often hang here. They belong to the most highly prized possessions of the Karen, and represent a very substantial barter element for the purchase of wives and similar transactions. The interior of the house contains only one room. [354] In its center is the fireplace with a structure hanging over it. On a bamboo platform, which stands around the entire wall space, are dishes, baskets, etc. The sleeping accommodations, not separated from each other, are in the rear of the room. Ears of corn and millet spikes--the [273] latter are used as an ingredient in the brewing [251] of rice brandy, which plays an important part with all the mountain tribes and also the Shan-- hang from the roof rafters. In between, hang large pieces of pork.